

## Intelligence Post-Mortems: Predictions for Charlie Hebdo

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The attacks on the offices of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, and related incidents in the Île de France region, have produced the same reactions that usually occur in the aftermath of major terrorist attacks. Powerful historical analogies ([‘France’s September 11’](#)) were evoked, national leaders made [defiant statements](#) and levels of security were heightened, [counter-terrorism reforms](#) discussed and the international community stood together in a remarkable show of solidarity. This was captured most vividly by the hashtag [#JeSuisCharlie](#) and a Unity March composed of huge crowds and attended by many world leaders.

A related, and equally familiar response was [accusations of intelligence-failures](#). Only a few days after the attacks, it emerged that two of the terrorists, Said and Cherif Kouachi, had previous convictions, served jail time and had been under surveillance by French and foreign security agencies, but somehow managed to slip the net. Questions have been raised as to how this could have happened and President François Hollande announced that an [investigation into the attacks](#) was ‘moving forward under the authority of the Ministry of Justice’.

These developments are neither new nor surprising: every major terrorist attack has been subject to *ex post facto* investigations. The purpose of such inquiries – what Roger Hilsman (1996) calls ‘intelligence-postmortems’ – is to establish which, if any, intelligence-failures occurred and make recommendations on how they can be prevented in the future.

Although the *Charlie Hebdo* inquiry is still some way off, previous terrorist-related intelligence-postmortems may provide clues as to what conclusions could be reached. For reasons of space, only four reports will be mentioned: those produced in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (9/11 hereafter), 2005 London

bombings, 2011 Norway attacks (*preliminary English version of selected chapters*), and the 2013 murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in London.

While each case has its own unique characteristics, the intelligence-postmortems offer striking similarities. They conclude, perhaps unsurprisingly, that intelligence agencies cannot prevent all terrorist attacks, whilst admitting to evidence of inadequacies in intelligence collection, analysis and integration processes, as well as flaws in cross-departmental and inter-agency cooperation. (It goes without say that other intelligence-postmortems might have reached different conclusions.)

- The 2004 [9/11 Commission Report](#) established that it was impossible to know ‘whether any single step or series of steps would have defeated (the terrorists)’, whilst conceding that the attacks ‘should not have come as a surprise’ as Islamist extremists had given ‘plenty of warning that they meant to kill Americans indiscriminately and in large numbers’. It also identified extensive failures in ‘imagination, policy, capabilities and management’ both in the US government and intelligence community.
- The 2006 UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) [Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005](#) found that the ‘chances of identifying attack planning and of preventing’ the attacks might have been greater ‘if more resources had been in place sooner’, and if the British Security Services had given ‘greater investigative priority’ to two individuals subsequently found to have been involved in the bombings. However, it emphasised that the decision not to do so was ‘understandable’ in light of the ‘other priority investigations being conducted and the limitations on Security Services resources’. It also recognized that more needed to be done to ‘improve the way that the Security Service and Special Branches (could) come together in a combined and coherent way’, though acknowledging that ‘some increase in intrusive activity’ would be an ‘inevitable consequence’ of such action.

- The 2012 [Gjørv Commission Report](#) stated that the attacks on the Government Complex in Oslo by Anders Breivik on 22 July 2011 ‘could have been prevented through effective implementation of already adopted security measures’, and that a ‘more rapid police operation’ was required on the island of Utøya. Nevertheless, it pointed out that there were ‘no grounds for contending that the Police Security Service could and should have averted the attacks’, although it ‘could have become aware of the perpetrator prior to (the attacks)’ with ‘better ways of working and a broader focus’.
- The 2014 [ISC report into the intelligence relating to the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby](#) concluded that the security agencies investigating Rigby's killers could not have predicted or prevented the attack, though ‘a number of errors’, which when taken together ‘might have made a difference’. Despite acknowledging the ‘pressures’ that the Security Services and investigative teams were under, the report found ‘insufficient co-ordination between MI5 and police investigations’ and recommended that steps be taken to ‘improve both the process and the level of communication’.

While it may be argued that is too soon to tell if the *Charlie Hebdo* intelligence-postmortem will reach similar conclusions to the ones above, there already are indications that this could well be the case. Two days after the attacks in Paris, Prime Minister Manuel Valls conceded that there were '[clear failings](#)' in intelligence and vowed to reinforce France's intelligence agencies. French security experts have also stated that the security services require major '[structural reforms](#)'; sentiments that may well be reflected in the final intelligence-postmortem. Of course, until further information is available, these assumptions remain speculative. Suffice to say that for now, the answer to the question of 'what next' remains: 'wait and see'.